Who Is Worthy?
Luke 7:1-10
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In a biography of Pope John XXIII there is a poignant paragraph which describes his first public appearance after his election as the head of the Roman Catholic Church. Thousands of people had crowded into the great piazza of St. Peter's to see the new Pope. "They watched as a huge tapestry was unfurled over the edge of the balcony. It was the coat of arms of Pius XII. They saw windows thrown open on either side of the balcony and groups of Cardinals, having just come from the Sistine Chapel, standing and watching, too. Now bugles...cut through the murmuring night... almost unexpectedly he was there, a solid, thickset figure in white. Other Popes had been borne to the balcony in portable thrones amid the full splendor of the Vatican Court. John XXIII came alone and on foot and he stood there so still and unassuming that seconds passed before most of those below were aware of what had happened." (I Will Be Called John, Lawrence Elliot, p.8-9).

It was a humble gesture: so refreshingly different from what the world associated with the Papacy. And it was followed by many others, the cumulative effect of which was to make John XXIII one of the most disarmingly winsome personalities in the modern era. The Roman Catholic Church is a different institution because of him and so, in many ways, is the Protestant establishment. His special gift was a sense of perspective. He was neither overwhelmed nor overly enamoured with the trappings of his office. With some regularity he expressed a feeling of unworthiness. Over the years the custom of genuflecting three times in the presence of the Pope had evolved. When one of his aides and close friends did it, Pope John asked him not to. His friend protested that the gesture was deeply a part of him and the Pope said, "Very well, but once is enough. Don't you think I believe you the first time?" (Ibid, p.251). Norman Cousins recorded the Pope's opening statement when they were alone for an interview: "Just remember, I'm an ordinary man: I have two eyes, a nose - a very large nose...You must feel completely relaxed." (Ibid, p.297).

A sense of unworthiness graced the Papacy of John XXIII and the amazing thing is that this very unworthiness made him seem worthy of his office and the esteem and reverence which accompanies it, even in the hearts of millions of non-Roman Catholics. Unworthiness making a person worthy - that is a principle very close to the heart of the author of the Third Gospel, St. Luke.

Consider our text this morning - the story of a remarkable soldier. He was a Centurion, a Roman soldier actually, assigned to the puppet King, Herod Antipas. A Centurion was a non-commissioned officer with one hundred men in his command. His job would have been one of keeping the peace and maintaining public order, a none too romantic assignment in Capernaum. There was no love lost between the Jews and the occupying Roman forces. The Jews, for their part, were curious people, fanatically nationalistic, always resentful of foreign presence on what they regarded as God-given land. Revolts and minor uprisings happened regularly and made the life of a Centurion dangerous. Their religious customs were odd and celebrated fanatically by the pious. And, on top of it all, it was a remote outpost of the Empire, very far from home.

It is not surprising that many Roman soldiers detested the Jews. Some intentionally violated religious customs such as the time the Roman Eagle was carried into the Temple courtyard in defiance of Judaism's fundamental rule regarding graven images. It was not unusual, also, for Roman officers to be bigoted and cruel and brutal, particularly with their servants and slaves.

This Centurion, however, did not fit the stereotype. Apparently he had grown to appreciate the Jewish people and their strange religion. When Capernaum needed a Synagogue he raised the money: if he was not an appreciator of Judaism he certainly understood the art of public relations. In addition, he had a servant who was very dear to him, a servant who, at the time of this incident, was critically ill. Already we know quite a bit about the man.

There lived another man in Capernaum, Jesus of Nazareth, whose reputation as a teacher and healer was spreading throughout Galilee. When He returned to Capernaum one time He was met by a delegation of Jews who had come on behalf of the Roman Centurion, asking if Jesus would heal his servant. "The man is worthy," they said. He went immediately but before He arrived at the Centurion's house He was intercepted by another delegation, this one sent by the Centurion himself, this one with a different message: "Lord, do not trouble yourself, for I am not worthy to have you under my roof." Perhaps he had second thoughts. More than likely he remembered that it would have been illegal for Jesus, a Jew, to enter a Gentile home, and so he requested that Jesus not come, but simply to say the word so the servant might be healed.

Now that impressed Jesus very much. At first reading, we assume that Jesus was impressed with the Centurion's confidence that the healing could be effected from a distance. I'm not sure about that. I think it may be that Jesus was astounded by this statement, "I am not worthy to have you under my roof." That was an unusual attitude. The Pharisees were very careful about the type of people they entertained. Worthiness was a criterion for guest, not host, ordinarily. It was the Centurion's humility I think Jesus meant when He said, "Not even in Israel have I found such faith."

-do Harris, Tomio here -see arthur rel. is a response.

Religion is very interested in the idea of worthiness it seems, and not always in a healthy way. Classically, religion has presented itself as the vehicle through which the individual may receive special consideration from God. The assumption is that God operates on the basis of human economics: so much blessing is given for so much worth demonstrated. Religion emerges as the way one accumulates worth. The Jews of the first century were guilty of that, but no more than religious people in every age. We simply assume that being faithful and pious will stand us in good stead with the Almighty. And having made that assumption it is impossible not to conclude that our standing with God is better than our neighbor's who is not pious and religious.

At the other extreme, religion has occasionally focused on unworthiness; hammering away at human sin and iniquity so eloquently that guilt seemed to be the only appropriate emotion to feel.

uniqueness + saving power

The peculiarity of the Gospel in Luke's presentation is precisely at this point. The Jewish friends of the Centurion were wrong when they claimed that he was worthy of Jesus' attention because he had built a synagogue. The Centurion, for his part, was equally wrong for claiming unworthiness on the basis of race or nationality or religion. The word here is that no one is worthy of the grace of Jesus Christ and everyone is worthy. The key is the message of grace. God's good will toward people is not based on something in them - their merit or generosity or piety or whatever, but on something in him - his love.

not the pain -

2 great ideas in Luke - often conveyed by outsiders - reconciliation + universal

It is no coincidence that Luke's Gospel portrays a compassionate and caring Christ, and that of the four his is the most humanistic. In Luke's account Jesus responds to human suffering, not on the basis of the caliber of people who are doing the suffering, but simply because someone is hurt. In the text this morning His concern for the servant of a man - a foreigner - He didn't even know, punctuates the point. Christians likewise, if they heed the Gospel according to Luke, care for needy people, not on the basis of merit, but simply out of their own love and compassion.

That's still strange talk, isn't it? Vulnerable talk - naive talk. Everyone knows, after all that you have to be careful. There are people out there who are dishonest. People who don't even try to work, people who have made an art-form out of bilking the social welfare agencies and County Welfare Department. But the simple message of Christianity is just this: when you help people, you help them not on the basis of their worth or merit, but because you love them. And if you can't bring yourself to love them you try to open your life so that the love of God for them can get through, because ultimately that's all in the world you have to offer them.

I read a delightful review recently of a new book about the late Dick Sheppard, Vicar of St. Martin's in the Fields of London. He began his ministry in the slums and he scandalized very proper Anglicans by saying bluntly, over and over again, "You can't preach Christ to empty bellies...Sympathy doesn't prevent children from getting rickets." When he was called to St. Martin's the church was dying. But if you've been to Trafalgar Square recently you know that St. Martin's is remarkably alive. Sheppard saw a vision of a parish church open day and night, a center for concerts and poetry and a haven for anyone who needed a haven. One hundred thousand people came to pay tribute when he died. A little boy was told to remove his cap because he was entering a church. He replied in astonishment: "This ain't a church. This is St. Martin's." How sad that church means you have to be someone to go inside. How sad that we want our charity - our love - to go only to those we judge to be worthy: as if love ever had anything to do with worth.

If you've ever been in love you know what I mean. You know that to be loved by someone else is to wonder how the other can love you so. It is to know the definition of grace - a love that, thank God, doesn't depend on my lovability, but on the other person. I'm not sure you can love until you've felt that.

The problem is pride. We'd like to be worth everything we get in life. We'd like to pay our own way, and keep our loved ones in debt. We'd like to look in the mirror and say, "You deserve everything you have. You are worth it." And we are quite capable of convincing ourselves that it is true. "Every man would like to be God if it were possible," Bertrand Russell said; "some few find it difficult to admit the impossibility."

Reinhold Niebuhr, in his definitive work, The Nature and Destiny of Man, discussed the problem of human pride at length. He cited the various forms human egotism takes - intellectual pride, for instance. "Each great thinker," he wrote, "makes the same mistake, in turn, of imagining himself the final thinker." (p.195). Hegel not only proclaimed the finality of his own thought but regarded his contemporary Prussian military state as the culmination of human history. Comte believed his philosophy to be final not only as philosophy but as a religion: and with pathetic national pride predicted that Paris would be the center of the new universal culture which he would found." (p.196).

Ultimately, the theologians have maintained, our intense need to regard ourselves as worthy gets between God and ourselves. For in the final analysis it becomes spiritual pride. Niebuhr wrote very perceptively: "Even the recognition in the sight of God that he is a sinner can be used as a vehicle of that very sin. If that final mystery of the sin of pride is not recognized the meaning of the Christian Gospel cannot be understood. (p.202).

God, apparently prefers humble people. From one end to the other the Bible is full of people who knew their limitations, could confess their needs, and who did not feel worthy of the tasks to which God was calling them. Moses was not much of a speaker. Gideon was a very humble man: David was a mere shepherd boy...and Jesus of Nazareth...The most incredible claim of Christian Faith is that God's own son was born of a carpenter and his betrothed.

There is a common grace inherent in honest humility. Honest humility is a very winsome thing. The book of the year for those who read theology is On Being a Christian, by Hans Kung. Kung is a renegade Roman priest, Professor of Theology at Tubingen University, Germany, and rather consistently in trouble with the Vatican. He is recognized, however, as one of the most brilliantly articulate spokesmen for the faith today. I was very taken by a sentence out of the introduction to the book as the author is explaining why he undertook so ambitious a project: "This book was written, not because the author thinks he is a good Christian but because he thinks that being a Christian is a particularly good thing." (p.20-21).

I find that refreshingly persuasive, compared to the blatant arrogance that characterizes so much religious literature. A sense of unworthiness is what often makes a person truly worthy of his or her task position, status or rank. And that, I would suggest, is what our text this morning teaches.

Humility is the channel through which God's grace can go to work. We know, I think, the practical truth of that dictum. We know, for instance, that the best love we have for our children is that love which does not depend on their performance, but the love which comes welling up out of our own hearts, regardless of how they happen to be behaving. We know that it is not unusual or particularly noble to love a child who is lovable. And we know, the reverse, that real healing love is called out of us when a child is being obnoxious. We know, or at least we ought to know, the devastating meaning behind the statement, "Mommy won't love you if you act like that." We know, in lateral social relationships, how difficult it is to maintain true friendship with the person who needs nothing from us, who knows all the answers, and the resolution to whatever problem we may be discussing. We have all, I would guess, been guilty of it on occasion. And in marriage - how deadly it can be when love is the price we negotiate for services rendered: when we feel that the other is obligated to love us - that we deserve it: when husbands and wives are no longer able to wonder at the fact that someone else can love them so. It is difficult to penetrate the veneer of the self-satisfied. And the saddist thing of all is that the self-satisfied will never know the richness and joy of real human encounter.

The miracle of the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the radical imperative of the Christian life is this: none of us is worthy of what has been given to us in Christ - and that realization makes us worthy of it: worthy and able to enjoy and celebrate and live the love our Father God has for us. Amen.

Almighty God, our Father, we are grateful for Your love. Give us the courage to acknowledge our needs. Keep us from arrogance and help us, always, to be honest with You and with ourselves: through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Breeches with Paul can't get over — Jesus said two Communion is open